

As the sound of rifts echoed through the laboratory, the children inside the machines began to spit out unintelligible things, screams, and painful wails.

“Stop... Please...”

“I don’t want to see...”

“I’m looking into myself...”

I could understand what that last utterance meant.

It was evident with the myriad of scenes that have unfolded in a flash before my eyes.

At the center of them, all was my back.

It was quite strange looking at countless versions of myself from behind. Though, it wasn't terror I felt. The sight was rather tranquil, in fact. Perhaps a more apt way to put it would be that I was unsure of what emotion to feel.

Then, all the visions twist, flip, split, and waver.

Until everything begins to overlap.

My multitudes occupying—or being placed in the space—turn around to look at me.

My eyes meet one of the dozens, hundreds, thousands of my other selves. It might be his that met mine.

And at a moment's notice, the sceneries fade away.

As though claimed by a bottomless chasm.

I vanished into the tremor.

I was on my knees, wailing in the midst of heavy rain.

The storm in my heart raged with such fury that the downpour couldn't compare.

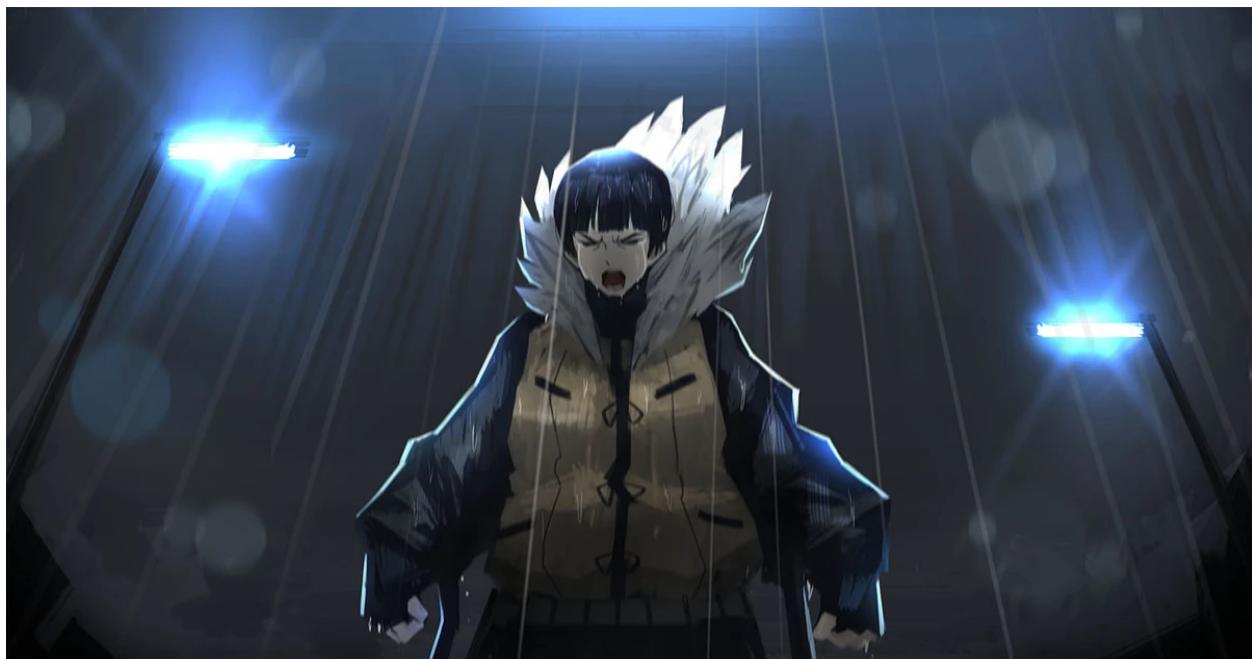
And my despair grows grimy and sodden in the rain.

Why am I crying out here?

I was a member of the Streetlight Office. An unremarkable one with unimpressive pay and a lack of fame; in other words, it was a job I had no reason to be attached to. Then, one day, we were invited to a place called the Library, and lost Lapis there while I survived.

We left you behind as you became part of the Library's collection.

“You stupid idiot... Why...”



I hoped that it wasn't Lapis who'd replaced the cake in the fridge.

I remember that one time, on a rainy day like this one, I got into a fight with Lapis over something small. I was so heated by her mocking tone, I was on the verge of raising my fist.

But when I simmered down a little, I noticed that she was holding an umbrella over my head as she kept replying to my grumbles in the same sassy tone.

The streetlight always stands solemnly, shining down in the dark.

Letting it gently illuminate the lurching waves of my heart would often help me calm down.

That made it my wish to be like you—shining ever more brightly in the dark.

I have to get Lapis's book from the Library.

That's—that's... what I can do for...

“Wahhhhhhhh!”

For a while, I poured out feelings I couldn't quite describe in the rain.

And the light shining down on me gradually dimmed before eventually fizzling out.

My surroundings blur again like raindrops running along a window.

The me in the scenery casts his gaze upon me to meet my eyes.

I don't try to avoid my glare.

“Director! How could this even be considered tolerable?”

The outcry of someone breathing heavily from uncontained emotions reached my ears.

As I looked around upon hearing the unfamiliar title, a desk piled high with papers caught my eye.

I felt it was a rather friendly sight, and with that, the feeling of unfamiliarity dissolved like spume.

I take a deep breath. My men are too easily upset at this immediate injustice, too eager to argue against it with logic. At such small things. At such insignificant things.

The southern branch of the Shi Association was rotten to the core. I aimed to excise each and every trace of the corruption taking hold of this organization.

But I still had work to do. Though I haven't had proper sleep for ten days, this was not yet the time for rest. I could only say this:

"I want you to suppress your feelings. And remind yourself; money, fame, and power rule over this world..."

I thought about the Fixers of partnered Offices whom I heard were all killed off.

The Section 3 director had summoned me one day to demand straight away that I report what I'm up to. When I replied that "I plan to fix what is broken," they pulled out a pack of cigarettes and burnt through it in one sitting.

Why that person decided to help with the cause was beyond me. They swore they'd retire next year, too.

As a matter of fact, we might face annihilation ourselves if we're not careful. Or worse, we might already be on the way down. I wonder what look will be on Thelma's face when he hears of Section 4's demise.

It was my job to hearten up my subordinates and assure them that we're almost through the crisis.

I should tell them with unwavering confidence.

However, being confident and having to be confident were two different matters. I had to ensure that everything I did wasn't a fool's errand. I must see to it that this is not to be a dead end for my men.

To ease this troubled mind, I turned to look out the window.

Then, a gust of wind blew outside, turning the world upside down once more.

My eyes meet another's.

The broiling heat wakes me up at dawn.

The weak breeze produced by my decrepit fan does little to dry off the beads of sweat trickling down my back.

I had to be up by 6 in the morning anyway.

I got a decent post at the local library, and I could avoid the attention of my landlord by leaving at this time of day. He forgave me with a generous smile when I couldn't meet rent for two months, but his understanding of juvenility turned into clamorous demands once he noticed my overdue rent would continue to grow for another month or two.

"I could use some cas..."

I keep writing and erasing text messages.

Living in a rural area, my parents don't know how pricey things are in the big city.

They think I've taken the midnight shift to make myself some extra money, but they don't know how hard it is to cover the gas, water, and electric bills for my cramped lodging—on top of food, travel, and all the other little things.

They were reassured by their son that his academic excellence as the top of his class would put him and his family on the road to luxury, but they didn't know that I applied for a lesser university to secure scholarships.

They don't know that I had to take a semester off to make a living, or that I was busy flying from table to table serving customers at a barbecue restaurant while others were busy flying in and out of the country, building international experience and studying abroad.

I wanted to know where it all went wrong. But with everything taken together, there's only one conclusion to make:

I was the one who tried and failed to qualify for the jobs.

It must have been my lack of effort that got me rejected.

If only I'd slept just a little less than I did.

If only I'd bought one fewer piece of clothing.

If only I hadn't gotten my hands on different food because I got sick of instant ramen.

If only I didn't have to study less and work more to make up for the hole it made in my balance.

If only I didn't let temptation get the better of me.

It's because I wasn't good enough. I wasn't trying hard enough.

I stepped outside to get some fresh air and gazed at the sky. When I was asked one time about what kind of person I desired to be as a kid during a job interview, I'd wanted to say: "I wished I could be rich enough to take a hot bath in winter." That was enough for me.

The interviewer didn't seem to agree, though.

I should get another job. I'll get up at 4 every morning. I ran my fingers, looking up job openings on my phone.

"Looking for Gym Receptionist"

My eyes caught a good enough offer. You can't find a part-time job that pays this much for these hours anywhere. I might even find time to study during the shift if I ask the owner nicely.

I was immersed in such thoughts under the blazing sunlight.

“Kyaaaaaah!”



I might have been too caught up in my thoughts to notice the terrified screams and people fleeing in chaos. I thought that the shadow cast over me was a cloud or something. It was a particularly large and dark shadow, but I didn't find it strange.

When I looked up again, a plane came into my sight; it was flying far lower than usual.

It looked as if it was about to plunge into the ground.

“Ah...”

I couldn't seem to recall the last time I saw that thing called an airplane fly above the City. More importantly, I can't tell for sure if I knew what an “airplane” was in the first place.

Where am I, anyway?

What District of the City did I think I was in? A wave of nausea rises in me as the strangeness of myself existing in this foreign place as if I always belonged here becomes apparent.

But all that confusion is useless now.

Try as I might, there's no way I can outrun that massive bird of steel. I can tell from this feeling. It's a race I'm doomed to lose, much like my struggle against poverty.

In the end, I can't escape the explosion that the plane will cause, crashing into the street.

All because...

I was too slow. I was too incapable.

"I should've taken out life insurance..."

When I came home every winter, I would see my father's back as he carried the cauldron of water he boiled with our barely functioning gas stove.

That was the last image that flashed in my mind.

In a blow of hot wind, everything went dark.

Before I can realize it, my eyes come into contact with yet another eye.

And the world shimmers once again.

“Next up is a genuine article presented by Master Garnet himself: an orange gemstone processed out of Carnelian, a subject procured from an orphanage in District 22.”

A voice coming from the side opened my eyes.

An orphanage? Carnelian was a shy kid who would only nod or shake heads instead of speaking up. But when we were alone, I was taught how to whistle with grace.

I take a moment to examine myself.

I'm wearing clothes only members of the Ring wear. Next to me is an auctioneer, excitedly following raised hands and chanting bids.

I am at a gallery's auction.

“There, we have 3 million Ahn.”

“Aha, the gentleman over there put up 4 million.”

“Yes, we’re now at 5 million. Will anyone give me more?”

[BANG-]

“And there we have it, a deal at 5 million Ahn. Congratulations.”

The strike of the gavel brought me back to reality. I could finally take a close look at the item placed at the auctioneer’s side.

“You are gems, and you must discover that you will possess unparalleled beauty if you keep cutting and polishing yourselves.”

I was reminded of the lesson my teacher would preach time and time again.

Teacher? Have I been to a seminar at one of the galleries?

The word should have been well-known to me, but it's bothering that it occurred to me in an unfamiliar scene.

That mattered little, though, compared to this jewel before my eyes.

“So beautiful...”



The gemstone glistened with a brilliant red hue reminiscent of sunset. My eyes fill with ecstatic delight upon beholding its luster.

The mystifying and magnificent color is exhibited only by trapping the rough gem in extreme heat and pressure, until every aspect they possess has been compressed into a single point. I can picture the process vividly in my head. I can almost sense the aesthetics of cruelty at the center of this precious stone.

I want to see more. What splendor will a gem of greater size show me? Now that I think about it... A friend by the name of Aqua had clear, blue eyes resembling an ocean vibrant with life. If I can have a gem holding that color, if there's a way to make it...

“N-No...”

I shook my head in immediate denial of the thought I just had, but it was no use. There was no hiding that I considered how to process my friends into luxury items just seconds ago. As if I was willing to carry it out as soon as I had the method.

That in turn makes me wonder how I came up with the idea of processing friends. Have I ever had a friend named Aqua? Before that, I can't be sure if I ever had friends at all.

Nothing is clear. Am I suffering from some kind of hallucination? Blurry memories of unknown origins are trying to obstruct my vision and judgement...

“Huh...”

I could no longer find the reason for the tears that were flowing from my eyes.

"Ah, of course. It would seem Master Garnet has been touched by the recognition of the true value of his artwork."

The auctioneer glamorized my tears as the signs of overflowing gratitude shed by a moved artist. As revolting as it is, I can't say that it's wrong. I adored this gem more than anyone, yet I loathed it at the same time.

Why, why?

Why do I loathe this beautiful yet melancholic piece of work?

Melancholic?

What about this gem evokes such a feeling in me?

Wasn't processing a friend the most rapturous part of making jewelry?

No, that is no friend! It's a gem, an uncut gem!

Why are these odd memories invading my mind?

Keep it together, Maestro...

Before I knew it.

The crowd murmurs, applauds.

And all the other noises tormenting my ears ceased.

Eyes send a piercing glare toward me from the cracked window.

Pointing hands extend from sleeves belonging to different clothes.

And mouths move in unison to speak one word.

““Garnet.””

“Gasp... Huff...”

I stumbled, trying to regain my balance. The lab was in my sight again.

It felt as if only a fraction of a second had passed, but simultaneously, I felt like I had just gone through multitudes of decades in different lives. The tubes have gone quiet; not a voice is heard. I peek into the machines to find out the truth behind this stillness.

“Ah...”



Inside, I find friends wrapped in some sort of translucent membrane, twitching irregularly. They were curled up like fetuses waiting to be birthed anew. Rejecting all interference. Yearning to return to that primal state.

“Hrghk...”

Just as I was overcome with vertigo and sickness, the world shifted yet again.

A foul performance relentlessly stabs me.

Thousands of notes penetrate the body, echoing through the whole Nest. All City dwellers stand in place, taking in the tidal waves of music.



Burning anguish swells in my heart. It's too hot for me to try and hold it. What lies before my eyes is beyond all belief—it hurts to look. Perhaps this is the kind of occasion that brings a person to bloody tears.

Why do I have to be robbed of my mundane happiness the instant I find it?

Why was the pajeon I bought crispier than ever today?

“Sorry, Lapis... I was... too late.”

I remember you saying that you were a fan of the streets of music, so it'd be okay. This tragedy could've been avoided had I found a way for us to move into a Nest.

The piano had long since ceased, but its sound still stings me. Maybe the performance has never ended in my heart.

I'm going to live the rest of my life in regret for this moment. Staring at you in helplessness, having become part of the performance, drenched in notes of blood raining from above. This silence. This hell.

“Huff... Gasp...”

My knees dropped to the ground, my legs fully bent. It didn’t hurt.

I am once again touching the cold floor of the laboratory. Dozens of worlds come crashing in, and then sweep away in waves. In one instant, I was a Fixer at Streetlight Office who had just lost his coworker; in another, I was a director at Shi Association sending its Fixers to doom; I was a poverty-stricken job seeker in an unrecognizable metropolis, a Maestro of the Ring—absorbed in beauty, a Fixer who faced the tragic loss of his whole family. The despair all my selves carried was unbearably torturous, and I felt the urge to turn my eyes away from everything and take refuge at the edge of the world.

But that wasn't to be.

There is still too much that remains for me to neglect and hide from. Even though the memories I experienced were harrowing, the pain I felt was proof of the love I held.

I see that even if all is fated to disappear without a trace one day, there are so many things that shine while the moment is in your hands. That crossing this vast, harsh wilderness is not an insufferable task thanks to the patches of flowers I find along the way.

That was a scent my friends deserved to perceive.

They were not meant to be forsaken to such fate in a place like this.



“Splendid, simply splendid, Garnet! Your sanity is intact at such a high refraction rate... Huah.”

I heard Jumsoon’s voice through the window.

“I must pull Mister Straud out of his chamber and put you in there. You were the brightest gem all along!”

That mesmerized look I’m sure I had at one point in one reflection is severely repulsive.

That was the most disgusting pair of eyes out of all those refracted that I saw over the window.

I’ve seen many pitiable, desolate, and sorrowful eyes up to now.

But that was the one I can’t stand. Even a minute’s brush of eye contact could engulf me in uncontrollable fury.

"The experimental data is almost complete. Just a tiny bit more, and I can perfect it at last: The glass window..."

So remember, engrave those moments in my memory. My pain will be forged into a knife that will cut through your heart.

My own guilt, combined with the guilt pouring in from my friends laid inside the machines.

When I find the determination to keep these feelings with me, rather than try to shake them off.

I realize now that although my body is in complete disorder.

My mind is able to confront it directly.

“You...”

And now I declare.

Adjusting my halved, crumpled mask.

Feeling the silence that has shrouded me in darkness radiate outward.

“You’ll die by my hands... in the most painful way imaginable...”